

THE COOK OR THE DOCTOR?

It is always with a shock of surprise and pain that we read, in the Registrar's Reports, and in the accounts of Coroners' Inquests, of death from starvation. Everybody says the same thing on every occasion of the kind; — that there must have been great fault somewhere, because the law of the land provides subsistence for every person in it. Let it be granted that deaths from destitution of the necessities of life are gratuitous: this is but a small part of the mortality from hunger. The number of persons who die annually from being underfed is very great. The victims themselves are often unaware of the fact: and so are their neighbours generally. Whatever disease last lays its grasp upon them, — invited by their low condition of body, — is called the cause of their death; but if the truth were fully understood, we should see in the register, instead of columns of entries of low fevers, tubercular diseases, and fatal affections of the viscera, one comprehensive term,— deficient nutriment.

If this kind and degree of mortality were owing to national poverty, or to social arrangements which condemn large classes to destitution, this would not be the place for any remarks on the subject. It would be a political topic of extreme gravity, which ought to occupy the full attention of Queen, Lords, Commons, and the political press: but it is far otherwise. There never was a time when work and means of subsistence were so generally diffused in the United Kingdom, as in the middle of the nineteenth century. There is every reason to believe that there is food enough in the country to keep up the health and strength of every person in it: and it is only the deficiency of our knowledge and skill in regard to food which causes a large number of men, women, and children to be underfed in the midst of abundance.

It is a rare thing to find the head of a household in any rank of life well informed as to the right kind and degree of nourishment for any one person. Hence there is such a thing as a family being underfed in the midst

of wealth. This happens where the quantity which goes down the throat is considered to be the same thing as so much nutriment. The same mistake is to be expected in the labourer's home; and it is found there, with the aggravation that the food which is eaten, whether more or less nourishing at best, is in great part spoiled by bad cookery. If it was thoroughly well known throughout the country how much nourishment everybody ought to have, what articles of food yield that nourishment best, and how they may be best prepared, there need be no underfeeding, from the palace to the labourer's cottage. It is only within a short time that this has been fully understood. The knowledge is now being applied to improve the diet and the health of our soldiers: and we must hope that the benefit will extend to all other classes.

The main principle of the matter is simply this.

A large proportion of the food we eat is mere water and material which does not nourish. What is nourishment? What is the precise meaning of it?

There are two kinds of nourishment in good and sufficient food; but they are not quite of equal necessity; they are of very different proportions; and the smaller amount (by weight), is the most indispensable. This smaller element is absolutely necessary to life, as it goes to repair that waste of the substance of the body which never stops. When this waste is not supplied by food containing this element, the parts perish very soon. A person starved to death on a desert island lives only a few days. I am acquainted with one who lived thirty days under these circumstances: but he was the only survivor of his party; he was barely breathing when assistance came; and his case is considered almost unparalleled.

He and his comrades had been set ashore in a mutiny. He made the Freemasons' sign to the leading mutineer, and the man returned in thirty days, landed with a kettle of hot brandy-and-water in his hand, and found

my friend senseless under a bush, with the bodies of his comrades lying about him. His appearance was extraordinary ever afterwards, as if every fibre in his face was vibrating without ceasing; but he recovered to be a world's wonder, for having lived thirty days through the waste of his frame, without its having been repaired more or less. Four days of absolute fasting is, I believe, usually considered fatal. The element which repairs this waste is called the nitrogenous substance of food; the other is called the carboniferous. There ought to be three times as much of the latter as of the former to keep one in full health; but a person may do without it for a short time without fatal consequences, because the nitrogenous portion supplies its place to a small extent.

The carboniferous element supports the respiration, keeps up the action of the frame by which the nitrogenous portion is carried where it is wanted, causing the circulation and the renewal of the blood, and the power of each part of the body to do its work. The two together make our food.

The first question, therefore, in choosing our food is, what articles of diet contain most of these two elements, with the least mixture of what is useless; and the next consideration is, how best to ensure the due proportion of three parts of one to one of the other. To understand and apply these two pieces of knowledge is the fundamental business of cookery.

Though this is the scientific basis of cookery, it by no means follows that every wife who goes to house-keeping, and every girl who takes a place as cook is expected to study the scientific part of the matter herself. Learned men have done it for her. They have told us what articles of food contain most of what we want, under the best conditions for use; and the treatment of the subject has now reached the practical point which suits the purposes of every-day life. Lists of good dinners have been made out, not only for hospitals, but for soldiers in barracks and in camp, from which we may learn

what mode of eating is most healthful for active people.

The useful articles of diet are numerous, and the commonest we have. As to the quantity required, the prize-fighter, who requires most, has thirty-six ounces per day, besides the innutritious portion which everybody swallows at every meal. For women, twenty ounces may suffice, though a larger allowance is better. Healthy workingmen ought to have from twenty-five to thirty ounces.

The greatest amount of nourishment of both kinds is contained in flour, meat, potatoes and peas; milk, cheese, rice, and other grains, and sugar; while tea, coffee, and cocoa are of great value in their way. . Such are the materials; but they may be so treated in the cooking as to waste what is most valuable, and preserve what is of the least consequence. It is possible to manage the making of a stew, so as to wash away the best qualities of the meat, and leave the vegetables hard, and drain away the thickening, causing a predominant taste of smoke and salt. When Miss Nightingale and her assistants undertook to cook in the Eastern Hospitals, they made a pint of thick arrowroot from one ounce of the powder, while in the general kitchen it took two ounces to make a pint of thin arrowroot. It was the proper boiling of the water that made the difference here. Again, two ounces of rice were saved on every four puddings when the nurses made the puddings. Such incidents show that it is not enough to have the best materials for nourishment; they must be husbanded in the preparation. It seems probable that, by sensible conduct all around, everybody might command enough of the best material for food; and it is certain that a very proportion of the wives of Englishmen know how to do justice to the food they buy.

As a matter of fact, what do the workingclasses of this country eat and drink? Different methods prevail in different districts, no doubt, and in different ranks of labourers; and, of course, one wife will differ from

another in household management, according to her training and her ability; but still, a few specimens will throw some light on the reasons why so many persons die every year from being underfed.

In some rural districts the diet in the cottages is just that of the Irish before the famine; a diet which the Irish peasant still prefers, and which is sufficient, if he is not stinted in quantity. "What, potatoes!" some reader may contemptuously exclaim. Yes; but not potatoes alone. The secret of potato-diet is having milk with it, that the one article may make up for the deficiency in the other. In winter, when milk is not to be had, the practice is to melt salt lard in water, for sauce; or to have a red herring (one for a whole family) as a relish: and then the food does not suffice. This is one mode. Another is, living on bread and tea, with occasional lard, or butter, or cheese. The tea is hot for breakfast, but cold at dinner, which is eaten in the field. Cold tea at dinner-time, — without sugar, or without milk; and sometimes without either! Bread from the baker's, most likely, with a trifle of something to take off the dryness. On Sundays and holidays there may be a morsel of bacon; but no fresh meat. This is another way. Elsewhere, the wife makes the bread; but not in goodly loaves, but in the form of "bread-cakes" — hot buttered cakes at breakfast; — the same cold at dinner; and hot buttered cakes for supper. This is for three days or so after the wages are paid; and for the rest of the week there is hunger — unless debt is permitted at the shop.

In none of these ways could the dinner come to less than a penny a head: and it must usually amount to a good deal more. Now, there are wives who can set a good dinner before their households for a penny a head; and for half as much again can provide a considerable variety in the course of the week. The penny dinner on record happened to be a beef dumpling, as some people call it, while others know it by the name of pot pie. The family consisted of six; and the dish cost sixpence, affording enough for everybody. The sticking-piece of beef was the meat-part, — costing three-pence.

Onions, seasoning, and the flour and lard for the crust made up the rest. No pieces of beef are to be had so cheap now; but there are plenty of good materials to be had by those who know how to look for them, ox-cheek, the sticking-piece of each sort of meat; a sheep's head and pluck; and the bits and odds and ends seen in the butcher's shop by housewives who go early enough to secure such things. The most valuable dish in a household that I know of, where there is nothing to spare, is a stew, which costs 1s. 3d, and affords a good meal to six hard-working persons, leaving some over: viz., two pounds of beef (the sticking-piece), one quart of groats, a pint of peas, and seasoning. Surely these dinners are better than bread, even if there is butter or cheese with it.

Cheese is, however, excellent food. It is all nourishment, and no waste. Butter is good too: but they are not meat, and can never supply the place of it. Yet, amidst all our improvements, it does not appear that the consumption of meat bears an increasing proportion to the population. The strangest thing is that we do not make more use of fish than we do. In the Catholic days of this country, everybody ate fish; and there seems to have been enough for everybody. But within this century, when our fisheries were languid, and fishing was a precarious vocation, many tons of fine fish have been habitually buried in the sands whenever "the take" was larger than common. There was no demand for more than a small quantity. The railways have since opened up the markets of the interior, so that in the very heart of the island fine fresh herrings may be had in the season at a shilling a score : yet the demand falls very far short of what might be expected of a people whose labouring classes rarely taste meat. It seems probable that the obstacle is the inability of the women to cook. Fish is a luxury when intelligently cooked; but it is easy to spoil it in the dressing. Fish which is overdone has lost its nutritive quality: but when one does meet with a woman who understands when to buy mackerel, herrings, whittings, and skate, and how to treat them when bought, one sees that varied and excellent meals may be had at no greater cost than mere dry bread.

This brings us again to the point of how different households live.

Leaving the rural districts for a moment, let us look into a street of one of the towns where fine fresh herrings may be had in season at a shilling a score. In one small house in a court, where the family work together at a trade, the women pay five shillings and sixpence each for board and lodging and the warmth of the fire, candles being extra. They get their pay on Saturday night, and pay down their week's money on Monday morning, when the mother gets two pecks of flour, which make eight loaves, or what is equivalent to them; and tea for the week; and meat — liver and bacon, or cheap pieces to make stews and pies of; and a little lard and sugar. The bread is made at home, and baked at the baker's for a half-penny a loaf. On Sundays there is always a piece of meat, baked, with potatoes in the dish, and a pudding. There is never any milk seen in the house, nor butter, rarely any cheese, and, oddly enough, no rice. The family keep fowls, as they live in a yard. In a street it does not answer, as the chickens get stolen or run over; but in a court they can be kept in the heart of a town. But not an egg, much less a chicken, do the family ever eat, though an egg beat up would serve them as a substitute for milk in their tea. Eggs bring a penny or twopence a piece; and they are too valuable to be indulged in at home. However strange this seems in regard to a commodity so easily produced, it is the reason assigned by many a family for abstaining from so excellent an article of food.

While these good people, who pay their way, and are a superior family in their station, are having breakfast and tea of bread without butter and tea without milk, and a dinner at twopence or threepence a-head, a neighbour proceeds somewhat differently, the husband is a workman in a factory, the wife keeps one of the thousand huckster's-shops in the town, and their mode of living is like that of thousands of their class. They have hot rolls and ham for breakfast; salmon and peas, or a spring goose, or a Christmas

turkey at dinner; and buttered muffins and beefsteak at tea. Sometimes they have prime beefsteak three times in one day. They, with their double resources, may keep it up for a time; but many of the shop-customers cannot. If you ask where all those piles of hot rolls and muffins that you see can possibly go to, you find that the largest baskets come out empty from the narrow crowded streets where the workmen's families live. They begin the week with stuffing themselves with greasy hot bread, at a cost which would supply dinners of meat and vegetables; and before the week is out they have no bread. Look into the huckster's shop, and you will see a workman's wife, or the man himself, buying a pound of ham, out of the very heart of the joint, for a shilling, and tea enough for a single cup for himself and his wife, and a pinch of sugar. Day after day scores of people may be seen buying quarter and half-quarter ounces of tea, morning and afternoon, paying on each occasion for the shopkeeper's time, and for paper and string. They pay also for the sins of debtors. The huckster pays himself in his prices for bad debts, long credit, and an infinity of paper and string, odd minutes, and waste in weighing and measuring; and these heavy fines, as we may call them, are levied upon customers who, if they knew how to buy and dress their food, might have as good a table for the same money as health and enjoyment could require. Instead of this constant comfort, they make waste which they do not enjoy, aware that a time of hunger cannot be far off. They are often underfed, never thoroughly well fed, and always in danger from every wandering sickness. The huckster gets into difficulties in the same way, and almost forgets the sight of beef-steak and salmon.

As these hucksters sell everything, they have customers for an article which is also sold all along the streets, as often as children pass to and from school and work, namely, "goodies" or "sweets," or, what sensible people call "sweet trash." The amount of bad toffy, comfits, and tarts consumed by the children of the workingclasses, and of the very poor, is beyond the belief of all who have not attended to the fact. It is enough to say that in hundreds of families, where meat is seldom or never seen on the table, the mothers are

in the constant habit of giving the children halfpence for “goodies ” to an amount which would supply each child with half a pound of good mutton per week.

One method, and perhaps the best, of reconciling these vagaries, and establishing a steady practice of good diet, would be to make good plain cooks of the women. This would be the best method of economy; but it is also a question how more material may be obtained. If we were all as wise as we might be, there would be meat, and other prime articles of food, within reach of every laborious man in the kingdom. It is painful to write of the inferior parts of the ox as the food of the labourer, while the sirloin and the rumpsteak are for the squire and the farmer. In the primary articles of food it might seem that men of all ranks should be on an equality. But what can one do and say? The truth is, practically, that the labourer rarely sees good meat, or any meat but bacon, on his table. I believe and trust that there will ere long be more meat produced; and if, at the same time, a wise economy could be introduced into all classes, by which no meat would be wasted, and no one would eat too much of it, and everyone could understand how to obtain and use it, we might hope to see the leg of mutton, and loin of pork, and goodly piece of boiling-beef, on the ploughman’s and the mason’s table, as regularly as in the houses of their employers.

Meantime, what can be done?

It is well known in certain rural districts that the labourer’s expenditure usually exceeds his avowed income: and that it is impossible to preserve the health and strength of cottage families on such means as they nominally have. Something is due to chance earnings or gifts: but the main part of the mystery is solved when we look at the game-preserves. Half a century ago, when the labourers actually could not live, — when bread was not only dear, but intolerable in quality, the offence of sheep-stealing was prevalent

beyond example. In the parishes where wages are 8s. per week, there is much poaching; and so there will be while men are required to live on such a pittance. Now, if the improvement in farming admitted of an advance of wages to 12s., or 14s. or 16s. a week (rates paid now where the farming is good), the man and the boys would be worth the increase, in mere strength and spirit; and, instead of stealing the squire's wild birds, the family might and would keep fowls of their own. Instead of getting hares and rabbits on the sly, they would keep a pig, be sure of prime bacon, and exchange the rest for beef and mutton. Till we see this change taking place in the very poorest districts, how may the interval be best bridged over? How may the greatest number be preserved from that condition of imperfect feeding which prepares thousands of our neighbours for being victims of every assault of disease?

It is essential to good nourishment that there should be some variety in food. Not only must there be both the classes of elements above spoken of, which are found together in the main articles of food, but the articles themselves must be varied. Bread includes various good elements; and so does milk; and so do potatoes: yet nobody could long remain in health on a diet of bread alone, or of potatoes without milk or other animal product. Thus, it is wretched management to buy bread, and nothing but bread, and feed the whole family upon it, because bread is the best single article of food. The aim should be to have both animal and vegetable food at every dinner. It must be remembered that animal food does not mean meat only. It includes fish, cheese, butter, milk, and eggs. This point might be carried, if the labouring class understood the importance of it, and knew better how to manage their affairs.

They might be assisted in many ways, and from two points of view especially; and without insulting them by the offer of alms, or of any further aid than neighbours ought always to be glad to afford and accept. They might be helped first to the food itself; and next, to the due preparation of

it.

It is not an unusual thing for ladies, in town and country, to buy calico, prints, and flannel, wholesale, in order to furnish schools and cottages with clothing, good and cheap. Why the same thing is not done with articles of food is strange. Ladies who have a little time to spare could do a prodigious amount of good in a rural parish (or in towns also), by procuring rice and coffee by the cwt., as imported; and barrels of Irish beef, and of Ohio pork; and quarter chests of tea; and carrots by the load, when the smaller roots would serve for the pig and the cows, while the best would come very cheap for the cottagers.

In Russian villages there is often a pair of scales under a shed for general use. It is intended primarily to weigh the wool and yarn of the spinners; but what a blessing it would be for many an English hamlet, where the people are at the mercy of the shop scales, and where they now buy mere pinches or handfuls of what they want! A pair of scales and a coffee-roaster for general use, with arrivals of rice at two pence farthing a pound, when it is fourpence or fivepence at the shop, and coffee at a shilling, reduced to tenpence by a due mixture with chicory, and prime pork at fourpence, and beef at fivepence, and Indian meal at some wonderfully low figure, — would change the aspect of many dinner-tables in the parish. The cheapest food, nutritious and really palatable, at present known, is believed to be one on which the operatives of a manufacturing town were mainly fed in a bad winter by an unkind employer, whose object was to embrace the greatest number within his means of relief. A mixture of Indian meal and rice, boiled for many hours, with condiments, made an excellent daily meal for hundreds of men, at (if I remember right), three farthings a head. In ordinary times, the main object is not to discover the cheapest food, but the cheapest good food, in sufficient variety; and the difference between the lazy slice of bread, served out to the whole family, to be eaten anyhow and anywhere, and the hot meal, properly served at table, need not be insisted

on here, or anywhere. Wholesale prices tend powerfully to the establishment of the dinner-table in cottage-life.

But what is to become of the village shopkeeper? some will ask. The village shopkeeper, or the city huckster, loses more by long credits and bad debts in an unthrifty neighbourhood than he can by three or four articles of his stock being otherwise supplied to his poorest customers. Where there is a general shop, the prosperity of the villagers is the best thing for the shopkeeper on the whole.

Finally, there is the preparation of the food. If existing housewives cannot teach their daughters, somebody else must. And why not? In certain factories in large towns, a room or two, and plenty of water, is granted by the employer, to enable the women to learn, in the evenings, to cook and to sew, as well as to read and write. Wherever the education (not the mere teaching to read and write) of girls of the labouring class is undertaken, there should be instruction in the ordinary arts of life. Why are not our National Schools in the country like that of Sandbach in Cheshire, where the girls cook for the sick, and thereby learn the economy of the table? By a report of that school published in the “Times” a year ago, it appears that upwards of two thousand meat dinners, well-cooked, hot, and savoury, were supplied in the year 1857, besides puddings, broths, arrow-root, and vegetables, at a cost of less than 70 £, including a Christmas dinner of roast beef and plum pudding to a large party of old folks. The money was supplied mainly from the Offertory: the girls of the parish were qualified for service, and, what is of more consequence, to be good wives; and the surgeons of the parish found a wonderful power of recovery in their patients.

As the vicar says: — “While a return to a generous diet after sickness, in the case of those who have been habituated to it, naturally renews the strength, with the poor, unaccustomed to animal food, the improvement is so marked as to be almost like life from the dead.”

Here is a hint as to lessening the unnecessary mortality of the kingdom, — a kind of mortality which, we fear, hardly enters into the recognised 100,000 of the Registrar's Reports. If the administration of animal food, in a wholesome and agreeable form, is like life from the dead, how long shall any of the homes of England be without it? There will be good meals in every house when there is a good cook there. If we cannot put good dinners upon all tables, we may proceed a long way towards putting a cook into every home in England. Let us have a kitchen attached to every girl's school, and schools for cookery in every town, and the nation will be nearer than it has ever been yet to being well fed, which is the same thing as saying that the children will grow up well, the men and women will wear well, and the aged will go down to their graves in comfort. This will not be disputed by doctor or nurse, gentle or simple : and if it be true, almost everybody may save and fortify life by teaching, or getting taught to one or more future wife, mistress, or maid, the simple, pleasant, and inestimable art of spreading the household table.

Harriet Martineau.

ONCE A WEEK [October 22, 1859.